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Bent Spines

By LEAH PRICE

A year ago, an injury left me unable to sit. For months, I could choose only between standing and lying on my back. In the past, sick days had bought me time to read, novels anesthetizing every ill. But now, with no lap to rest a book on, books became unwieldy. Tables were too high when I lay down, too low when I stood up. Flat on the floor, I tired of propping a paperback above my head. Pacing the room, I craved an extra hand: one to hold the book, another to turn its pages, a third to underline.

In earlier eras, I wouldn't have minded. The Romans needed no table to rest their scrolls on; in an age when adults read aloud, standing allowed the voice to project. Doctors in antiquity recommended reading as a healthy exercise for body and mind: a speaker holding a scroll expanded his lungs, strengthened his arms and stretched his back. Early in the first millennium, however, as the unfurled scroll gave way to the folded and gathered codex that we know today, readers began to fold at the waist as well. Those who had stood now sat; those who had sat now reclined. By the 18th century, the rise of safer candles and smaller trim sizes let readers take books to bed. Previously almost as large as a mainframe, treasonous tracts and pornographic illustrations alike could now be slipped into a pocket. The Romantic poets were the first to loll on the grass without worrying about stained pages: al fresco reading was born in tandem with the picnic. A century later, Teddy Roosevelt had his library bound in pigskin to withstand the rigors of safari.

But what would protect human bodies from the rigors of books? Long before 1949, when the term "ergonomics" was coined, doctors blamed reading for health hazards including (to quote one 1795 authority) "weakening of the eyes, heat rashes, gout, arthritis, hemorrhoids, asthma, apoplexy, pulmonary disease, indigestion, blocking of the bowels, nervous disorder, migraines, epilepsy, hypochondria and melancholy."

And muscle spasms, I might have added. I, too, blamed reading, or more specifically e-reading, for my symptoms. Tired of shouldering a book bag, I had resolved to shrink my literary footprint. Reams of paper dwindled into a Kindle. Tattered photocopies were replaced with PDFs. Slipping a svelte new netbook into a ladylike purse, I felt younger and slimmer myself. Until my neck began to ache, then my shoulders, then my back.

Now that I could no longer sit, my desk needed to be hoisted onto cinder blocks, like the stilettos I couldn't wear myself. When my feet tired, I lay underneath the glass coffee table with a copy of Galen Cranz's study "The Chair" (1998) spread-eagle on top. Cranz, an architecture professor as well as a teacher of the Alexander Technique, points out that chairs connote prestige: hence the term "chairman," and the shock value of Gandhi's decision to sit on the floor. She could have also mentioned the 1960 sit-in in Greensboro, N.C., that breached Woolworth's boundary between the bar where blacks stood and the counter where whites sat. Yet standing can also confer power. Looming over a seminar table, I struck students dumb: the tallest person in the room is usually the loudest. In Romance languages, "seat" comes from the same root as "sedative." "Sit" is what humans tell dogs.

Social discomfort compounded physical pain. Standing up, I tried not to stand out. Clutching a newspaper on rush-hour subways, I blended into the rest of the crowd. In museums, the chair in every portrait made me flinch, but I coveted the odalisques' sofas. David's "Death of Marat" (1793) showed the Jacobin martyr expiring in a bathtub, flanked by an inkstand and a pool of his own blood. To treat what seems to have been dermatitis herpetiformis, he had been soaking his skin while answering the mail using an over-the-tub writing tray.

Such revolutionary devices aren't confined to one end of the political spectrum. It was at a standing desk that Donald Rumsfeld scrawled his notorious comment on a memo justifying the use of stress positions in Guantánamo interrogations: "I stand for 8-10 hours a day. Why is standing limited to 4 hours?" Hemingway, too, wrote standing up: real men don't take paperwork sitting down. The current fashion for sit-stand desks, which pogo your work surface up and down, reinvents the male clerk's traditional perch on countinghouse stools. Counters were standard until desks and chairs invaded offices in the second half of the 19th century, along with typewriters and women.

Whether sitting or standing, multitaskers have long dreamed of hands-free reading. Bookmarks began their life as prosthetic fingers. Even the index shares its name with the second digit, used to hold one page open while flipping to another. And long before the Kindle made life easier for nursing mothers, labor-saving devices were created to take heavy books off readers' hands. Renaissance inventors designed Ferris-wheel-like contraptions in which each volume rides flat on a tray, open to just where the reader left it. Thomas Jefferson dreamed up a lazy-susan-like bookstand that could hold five books open at once. One 16th-century machine promised to spare "those who are indisposed and tormented by gout" the trouble of lifting their books. Today, most of us adjust our chairs in relation to a fixed-height reading surface.

In the end, my own cure was homeopathic. Books had sickened me, and books saved me. "Back Pain Remedies for Dummies" taught me to sit with my feet propped on the Yellow Pages (I substituted an outdated Microsoft manual). I sought tips from "The Anatomy Lesson," whose author, Philip Roth, writes standing at a monitor perched on a ream of paper. The novel's protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman, spends most of the book laid flat by neck spasms. Resisting the orthopedist's advice to replace his manual typewriter with an I.B.M. Selectric, Zuckerman attempts to stem the damage to his literary career by buying prismatic glasses (which allow him to read a book propped against his knees without lifting his head off the floor) and finding younger women to read aloud to him. Lacking human audio books, I Googled the glasses. Another Web site offered metal clamps that dangle a volume above a supine reader like a sword of Damocles, and tractor-style "saddle seats" that turn Dilbert into John Wayne.

The Back Store didn't sell me a back, but physical therapy eventually restored me the use of my own. Today, my lap once again holds a laptop. And now that my spine is as straight as any hardback's, I can finally curl up with a good book. Or at least, with WebMD.